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# **The *Lula* girl as ‘sublime and childlike’: nostalgic investments in contemporary fashion magazines**

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## **Abstract**

*Since the 1980s, the figure of the ‘girl’ has become one of the most prominent subject positions offered up in British fashion magazines (Jobling 1999). This way of constructing femininity harks back to the observation made by Roland Barthes, in 1967, that the rhetoric of fashion ‘reproduces, on the level of clothing, the mythic situation of Women in Western civilization, at once sublime and childlike’ (1990: 242). This article argues that both facets – the sublime and the childlike – continue to inform constructions of femininity in contemporary fashion magazines, with the niche publication, Lula, girl of my dreams, being a particularly marked example. Methods of textual and discourse analysis are employed to make sense of written and visual excerpts, drawing from issues of Lula spanning 2006 to 2012. Discourses on Romantic childhood and discourses on ‘high’ fashion – both of which construct their objects as ‘pure’ – are shown to intersect on the pages of Lula thus producing the Lula girl as otherworldly creature, while disavowing the less palatable aspects of the fashion industry that bring her into being. Inviting nostalgic recollection of childhood, the Lula girl is shown not to recall childhood in any objective sense but rather to reconstruct childhood through the mythic tropes of Romantic innocence. The possible appeal of this vision of womanhood for both magazine producers and consumers is theorized through the concept of ‘investment’ as well as recent debates on pleasure and politics in feminist media studies. Ultimately, the Lula girl is shown to facilitate imaginary solutions for real-life frustrations by dissolving the contradictions of normative femininity as well as encompassing elements excluded from contemporary definitions of adulthood.*

## **Keywords**

Lula magazine

the ‘girl’ of fashion

childlike femininity

Romantic childhood

nostalgia

wonder

‘purity’

feminist media studies

## Introduction

Roland Barthes, writing in 1967, viewed fashion as a discourse that echoed ‘the mythic situation of Women in Western civilization, at once sublime and childlike’ (1990: 242). In this article I argue for the continuing relevance of Barthes’ statement to the contemporary fashion media, with particular reference to the niche fashion magazine, *Lula, girl of my dreams*. Both facets – the sublime and the childlike – find expression in the *Lula girl*, who inhabits the pages of *Lula* magazine. One guise in which she appears is 6-year-old Wednesday Addams: girl-child of the macabre *Addams Family* (as fictionalized in cartoon, film and beyond). *Lula*’s reverence for Wednesday is elaborated as follows: ‘Maybe we love the introspective literary-minded girl because, especially in today’s ultra-public, “look-at-me” culture, we never quite know what she’s thinking’ (*Lula* no.7 2008: 52–3). Being childlike in age and sublime in intellect, not to mention her sardonic wit, Wednesday Addams sits perfectly with Barthes’ dichotomy.

Taking the ‘sublime and childlike’ as a starting point, in this article I unpick the discursive construction of the *Lula girl* as a normative subject position offered up by *Lula* magazine. Drawing from issues spanning 2006 to 2012, I explore both written and visual excerpts using techniques of textual and discourse analysis. The notion of ‘fashion media discourse’ (Rocamora 2009) allows me to situate the *Lula girl* as party to interrelated discourses on childhood, girlhood and womanhood that extend beyond the pages of *Lula* magazine, alone. The analysis of the *Lula girl* presented here is one case study drawn from a larger research project into the various ways in which women are represented as childlike in contemporary fashion media.

In terms of discourse, I begin by situating the *Lula Girl* within scholarly debate on the ‘girl’ as being central to the *lingua franca* of fashion magazines, as well as having a complex textual history more generally. I then show how discourses on Romantic childhood as ‘genderless’ overlap and intersect with discourses on fashion as ‘high’ art (Rocamora 2001). Both discourses construct their objects as ‘pure’, sacred and distanced from the everyday, thus allowing the *Lula girl* to be carved out as childlike and wondrous, elevated and otherworldly. Rather than working to recall – or remember – one’s childhood memories in any objective sense, the *Lula girl* is shown to romanticize the very idea of childhood through the ‘narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction’ (Stewart 1993: 23). The appeal of childhood, as nostalgic and idealized, is theorized through the concept of ‘investment’, both for readers and producers of the magazine (Ang and Hermes 1996). Finally, I discuss the feminist implications of investment in the childlike *Lula girl*, with reference to pleasure/politics debates in feminist media studies. Not only does the *Lula girl* potentially disavow or ‘forget’ the less palatable aspects of the fashion industry, but she also dissolves, via the imagination, certain contradictions of contemporary womanhood.

### **Situating *Lula* as niche fashion magazine with indefinite boundaries**

*Lula, Girl of my Dreams* is a British fashion magazine founded in 2005 by Canadian stylist Leith Clark. Released biannually, *Lula* is printed by independent publisher White & Richardson and reportedly has a readership of 480,000 (White and Richardson 2013), with a competitive online market for back copies (see Ebay 2013). Owing to its content and high quality finish, *Lula* can be categorized as a niche fashion magazine: a particular genre of magazine that emerged in the 1990s (Lynge-Jorlén 2012). Niche fashion magazines, as defined by Ane Lynge-Jorlén, are ‘small-scale independent fashion magazines that merge high fashion with art and style cultures, often targeting both men and women’ (2012: 8–9). *Lula* fits with this definition except for the magazine’s readership, which is reportedly 92% female and just 8% male (White and Richardson 2013).<sup>1</sup> Being produced in London and labelled a ‘fashion and lifestyle magazine’ (White and Richardson 2013), *Lula* also falls within the subgenre of ‘glossy niche magazines’ (as identified by Lynge-Jorlén 2012: 26, note 1). These are a group of publications ‘especially found in Britain’ that ‘[mediate] fashion as fun, lightweight, and ironic’ (Lynge-Jorlén 2012: 16). That said, *Lula* arguably leans towards the ‘fun’ and ‘lightweight’ descriptors, more than the ‘ironic’.

Considering the production side further, niche magazines are ‘often staffed by people with “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1995) who participate in, and produce, style cultures themselves’ (Lynge-Jorlén 2012: 8). Leith Clark, founder of *Lula* and editor-in-chief until 2013, is one such case in point; she is a stylist to celebrities, such as Keira Knightley (Fox 2008), as well as a stylist for fashion advertising and editorial beyond the pages of *Lula* magazine (see models.com 2013). One notable example of Clark’s commercial work is her contribution as fashion editor and stylist to Orla Kiely advertising campaigns from 2009 to 2013. Often nostalgic in tone, these advertisements have featured in numerous issues of *Lula*, typically appearing in the closing pages (see for instance no.9 2009; no.13 2011; no.14 2012). Thus, as Lynge-Jorlén points out, niche fashion magazines have strong links to the wider fashion industry and often their ‘financial underpinning is advertising revenue’ (Lynge-Jorlén 2012: 7–8). That said, advertisements in *Lula* are mostly confined to the opening and closing pages of the magazine, with the middle section remaining largely ‘unpolluted’ by such blatant commercial intent (see for instance *Lula* no.13 2011 and no.14 2012). Thus, despite being set apart from the mainstream fashion media, and including art and culture on their pages, niche magazines, like *Lula*, are by no means outside commercial interests.

The niche fashion magazine as tied to the broader cultural landscape brings to mind the work of Michel Foucault (2002 [1969]: 25) who referred to the boundaries of the book as ‘never clear-cut’. ‘Beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, [the book] is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network’ (Foucault 2002 [1969]: 25–26). The fashion magazine is similarly conceptualized by Agnès Rocamora (2009) as a set

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<sup>1</sup> It is, however, unclear whether White and Richardson’s readership figure accounts for ‘secondary readership’ of *Lula* that may include a more diverse range of individuals beyond the initial purchaser alone (Ferguson 1983).



of ‘statements’ – broadly construed to include both image and text – that are party to a much wider category of ‘fashion media discourse’. Fashion media discourse consists of statements

articulated in a set of different magazines, but also in the form of fashion features, fashion spreads, newspaper fashion reports or fashion advertisements. Similarly, it is also made up of statements, concepts and themes that run across various texts and fields [such as] novels and films. (Rocamora 2009: 58)

Thus, fashion media discourse runs across magazines, including niche publications like *Lula*, while also being *intertextual* in that it ‘overflows the limits of the field it unfolds in’ (Rocamora 2009: 58). Or put differently, fashion magazines ‘evoke or quote other media – be they works of literature, advertisements, films, or pop videos’ (Jobling 1999: 6). Key to this article, then, is the idea that statements on femininities in fashion media discourse should not be seen as ‘particular to this field but [as] more generally [informing] discourses on women in today’s society’ (Rocamora 2009: 58). As such, the *Lula girl* can be understood as emerging from a set of interrelated discourses on girlhood, childhood and womanhood that extend beyond the pages of *Lula* magazine, alone.

### **Anchoring *Lula girls* in the myth of Romantic childhood**

Juxtaposition of text and image in *Lula* magazine serves to anchor the publication, unambiguously, within the realm of childhood. The magazine’s opening photospread is typically entitled ‘Once upon a Time’, thus evoking fairytale, a genre typically associated with children and bedtime stories (see, for instance, *Lula* nos. 3,7,8,10,11,13,14). This spirit carries over into the publication as a whole, with stockist information being detailed beneath the dreamy heading ‘Wishlist’. Contributing guests are introduced on the ‘Contributors’ page, alongside a photograph: sometimes of their adult self, but more often of their childhood self (see Figure 1).

# CONTRIBUTORS



**ALI MICHAEL**

**WHAT WERE YOU LIKE AS A LITTLE GIRL?**  
*I was a complete and absolute tomboy.*  
**WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU WERE LITTLE?**  
*When really young, a paleontologist, then an equine vet.*  
**HAVE YOU EVER HAD A NICKNAME?**  
*The only nickname I've ever had was Gloriesticks, in my seventh grade gym class because of my extremely pale legs.*  
**WHAT WERE YOU LIKE IN HIGH SCHOOL?**  
*I was always self-conscious about my personality and appearance. I was teased for being pale and my big eyebrows - not exactly characteristics of beauty in Texas high schools.*  
**TELL US SOMETHING WE DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU.**  
*I was run over by a horse aged 14. It was intense.*  
**WHICH FAIRYTALE CHARACTER ARE YOU LIKE?**  
*I guess Snow White because we're both very pasty.*



**LYSON MARCHESSAULT**

**WHAT DO YOU DO?**  
*Fashion Assistant. I love the way we can tell a story with clothes.*  
**WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE COLOUR?**  
*Old fashioned pink*  
**FAVOURITE WORD?**  
*Lullaby*  
**CHOSEN SUPER POWER?**  
*To be a fairy and go into my own world.*  
**WHAT DID YOU LAST DREAM ABOUT?**  
*Riding a pink pony, eating strawberries!*



**ANDREA CUSICK**

**WHAT DO YOU DO?**  
*Dreamer, little wanderer, and writer.*  
**WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE COLOUR?**  
*Purblue. As a 3 year old, I couldn't say purple. A cross between blue and purple - namely indigo - was, and still is, my favourite colour.*  
**CHOSEN SUPER POWER?**  
*Teleportation. But, I grew up nishing for Penny Crayon's magic pencils.*  
**FAVOURITE WORD?**  
*Infinite.*



**AUDREY MARTAY**

**WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE WAY TO SPEND SUNDAY?**  
*Stay in my PJ's all day.*  
**WHEN AND WHERE WERE YOU HAPPIEST?**  
*The 1st night in a tipi with my children this summer in Spain.*  
**WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE AS A LITTLE GIRL?**  
*I wanted to have my own candy store.*  
**TELL US SOMETHING NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT YOU.**  
*I drink Coca-Cola for breakfast.*  
**WHICH FAIRYTALE CHARACTER ARE YOU LIKE?**  
*Cinderella.*  
**WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE WORD?**  
*Equisite.*  
**WHAT DO YOU DO? WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT IT?**  
*I started acting 5 years ago. I'm preparing for my 5th film and a play. Everytime I play, I get shivers all over my body.*



**ANNA TAVANI**

**WHAT DO YOU DO?**  
*I am a prop stylist/set designer, I do this because of the thrill of creating a dreamworld.*  
**WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE COLOUR?**  
*All reds, all the way to purple and pink.*  
**WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE WORD?**  
*Delicious.*  
**CHOSEN SUPER POWER?**  
*A magic wand for sets to be built in seconds.*  
**WHAT DID YOU LAST DREAM ABOUT?**  
*Having fire red hair.*



**JONAS LOPGREN**

**WHAT DO YOU DO?**  
*I create images. Escape from reality.*  
**WHAT DID YOU LAST DREAM ABOUT?**  
*I was falling, as usual. According to religious people, this means I'm not listening to the Lord.*  
**CHOSEN SUPER POWER?**  
*To be master of space and time.*  
**FAVOURITE WORD?**  
*Snow.*  
**FAVOURITE COLOUR?**  
*Green.*

Figure 1. 'Contributors', *Lula* no.7 (2008: 23).

A string of questions accompanies each photo, such as:

- What is the best thing about being a girl? (*Lula* no.15 2012: 26)
- What is your favourite fairytale? (*Lula* no.13 2011: 32)
- Where are you happiest? (*Lula* no.14 2012: 24)
- What's your favourite colour? (*Lula* no.7 2008: 23, see Figure 1)
- Favourite cake? (*Lula* no.10 2010: 19)
- Do you remember your first day at school? (*Lula* no.3 2006: 17)
- What is your favourite memory of your grandmother? (*Lula* no.8 2009: 23)
- What did you want to be when you were little? (*Lula* no.7 2008: 23, see Figure 1)

The language in which such queries are couched might easily belong to the register of a young child, not least in terms of content, such as colours, fairytales, cake and first days at school. Framing questions in this way interpellates, or at least encourages, contributors to assume the position of a child in articulating a response. However, there are moments when that position is refused, whether through irony or reference to womanhood. One such example consists in designer Luella Bartley's response to the question, 'What is the best thing about being a girl?' (Lula no.15 2012: 26). Bartley responds by saying 'Finally becoming a woman. It really terrified the living bejeezers out of me but now I'm almost there I realise it's really rather good.' Being in her late thirties at the time of press, Bartley refused to be hailed as a 'girl' instead positioning herself as a woman, albeit 'almost'.

The questions cited above can be understood as statements belonging to a particular discourse on childhood. Like femininity or masculinity, the notion of childhood is not singular and universal but instead discursively elaborated as multiple and contradictory (Higonnet 1998). As such, it is important to consider the particular discourse to which the above statements belong. A clue consists in the nostalgic tone of the last three questions: 'Do you remember your first day at school?'; 'What is your favourite memory of your grandmother?'; and 'What did you want to be when you were little?'. The backward-looking inflection of these questions invites contributors to engage in what Susan Stewart (1993: 23) terms 'the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction'. The concept of nostalgia was theorized in 1798 by Immanuel Kant (2006) who understood it to involve a longing to return home. Yet, the object of longing was not home in a geographical sense, but rather the temporal home of one's youth: a home that could not be brought back (Kant 2006 [1798]). Inauthenticity is, therefore, the hallmark of nostalgia in that 'nostalgic reconstruction' can only be achieved through narrative; it is a rose-tinted past, a past that 'wears a distinctly utopian face, [...] a past which has only ideological reality' (Stewart 1993: 23). Thus, while the phenomenon of nostalgia might be deemed an 'aspect of memory', the former is oft-considered 'antithetical' to the latter (Baccolini 2007: 173).<sup>2</sup>

Reading *Lula* through the lens of nostalgia, rather than memory, fits with comments made by Leith Clark, founder of *Lula*, when asked to describe her personal 'style':

Lolita is the wrong word, but I guess it's quite playful and eclectic. If I want to buy something, it's usually for some sort of nostalgic reason – because it reminds me of Alice in Wonderland or Little Orphan Annie. I think we are most true to our tastes when we are young and before anyone has told us what we should like. (Clark quoted in Fox 2008)

Clark's nostalgic idealization of childhood resonates with a certain discourse in which childhood is mythologized as Romantic: that 'edenic state from which adults fall, never to return' (Higonnet 1998: 28).

The term 'Romantic childhood', as theorized by Anne Higonnet (1998), can be understood as shorthand for a particular way of representing girl and boy children, crystallizing in art and literature

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<sup>2</sup> For discussion of nostalgia in the context of British *Vogue*, see Laing (2012).

from the eighteenth century onwards (Ariès 1996 [1960]). In a literary sense, it tends to be associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his work *Émile* (1993 [1762]). A central tenet of Rousseau's thought, for which he is often cited, is that the attributes of childhood should be valued *in their own right*, for 'childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling [and] nothing is more foolish than to try and substitute our [adult] ways [for them]...' (1993 [1762]: 64). Crucially, Rousseau's treatise posits the 'pure' child in binary opposition to the 'spoiled' adult, the latter being tarnished by industrial society. The Romantic child's perceived proximity to nature is encapsulated, and elaborated upon, in Joshua Reynolds' painting *The Age of Innocence* (c.1788), which became the foundation of our visual conception of childhood (Higonnet 1998: 23). The painting depicts a barefoot child whose feet are 'pristinely clean' (Higonnet 1998: 24) and whose delicate white dress conceals the erogenous zones most commonly associated with adult sexuality (1998: 15). As such, Romantic children 'deny, or enable us to forget, many aspects of adult society' (Higonnet 1998: 23). The Romantic child is mythologized as *tabula rasa*: devoid of class, gender, and thoughts (Higonnet 1998: 24). Yet, the tropes of Romantic childhood are far from neutral in their application. Such ostensible 'blankness' is, in fact, the naturalization of white, middle- to upper-class childhood as the 'innocent' ideal, articulated from the standpoint of the adult painter, patron or viewer. The marked paleness of the child's skin is significant in that the term 'blue-blooded', thought to derive from the visible veins of those with fair complexion, historically stood for so-called racial and lineal 'purity', and as such has racist and anti-Semitic undertones (Lambert 1989: 145).

The gendered nature of childhood is also elided in Reynolds' painting, thus forgetting that girl children were not granted the same privileges as boy children, neither in Rousseau's text nor in lived experience: a fact lamented by Rousseau's contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft (2004 [1792]).<sup>3</sup> Although Wollstonecraft opposed the differential education of girl and boy children at the time, one aspect of Rousseau's treatise to which she did not object was the staunch belief in the innocence of children (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 29, 158–59). This idealization of the 'innocent' child arguably carries over into present day, with discourses 'often put in curiously argumentative form, a form which seems to reach toward absolutes, especially the absolute of "purity"' (Kincaid 1992: 219). Yet the continuation of such discourses carries with it the same 'exclusionary rhetoric' in that innocence 'generally does not extend its privileges to all children' (Giroux 2000: 8; see also Aapola et al. 2005). Accordingly, it is white, middle-class children who are most often constructed as 'innocent' in the American press (Giroux 2000). In the context of this article, the important point concerns the ways in which *Lula* draws from, and elaborates upon, the discourse of Romantic innocence in all its exclusionary tropes.

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<sup>3</sup> The 'genderless' nature of Romantic childhood might be explained with reference to the view that children, and particularly middle-class children, have historically been aligned with women and the domestic sphere, resulting in a construction of childhood that is 'feminized' (Cook 2004: 31 citing Heininger).

### **The ‘girl’ and the inability of language to be ‘cleansed’**

Yet Romantic childhood is not the only discourse at play in *Lula* magazine; discourses on ‘girlhood’ are also present. This is evidenced in the publication’s full title *Lula, girl of my dreams*, as well as the practice of labelling women ‘*Lula girls*’ rather than ‘*Lula children*’ (see, for instance, Figure 2 as well as the recurring photo spread ‘All the Real Girls’ in *Lula* no.3 2006 and *Lula* no.9 2009). *Lula*’s editorial decision to primarily adopt the term ‘girl’ rather than ‘woman’ or ‘child’ is congruent with practices of representing women in the wider fashion media (Jobling 1999: 11). Early examples include the fashionable ‘girl’ of the twenties and thirties who symbolized ‘progress and modernity’ (McRobbie 2009), and the physically ‘waif-like and adolescent’ girl of 1960s London (Radner 2000: 128) who symbolized, amongst other things, a newfound degree of financial independence. In the contemporary context, Paul Jobling (1999) underscores the ‘gynandrous’ potential of ‘the girl’: she is ‘a girl who could also be a boy’. She is ‘a cipher that can be mobilised to make a symbolic appeal on several levels’ (1999: 111–12). Replete with contradictions, the symbolic potential of the ‘girl’ is vast, malleable and difficult to pin down. Further complicating meaning is the textual history of the word, once used to underscore women’s lack of full adult status (Oakley 1994). In 1950s western society ‘it was quite common to refer to any female as a “girl”, whether she was a child, an adult or even a senior citizen!’ (Aapola et al. 2005: 6).

In recent years, young feminists have attempted to re-signify the word ‘girl’, seeking to ‘reclaim, re-invent or invert its meaning’ (Aapola et al. 2005: 6). The *Riot Grrrl* movement, for instance, sought to ‘[celebrate] the fierce and aggressive potential of girls (the ‘grrr’ stood for growling) as well as [the] reconstitution of girl culture as a positive force embracing self-expression’ (Aapola et al. 2005: 20 citing Hesford 1999). Yet, rather than effecting a wholesale supersession of older meanings, interventions (like that of the *Riot Grrrls*) can be understood to superimpose new meanings onto the word ‘girl’. The notion of *superimposition* allows for the enduring visibility of older meanings – even if only partially evident. It also accounts for the impossibility of ‘[cleansing] language completely, [of] screening out all the other, hidden meanings which might modify or distort what we want to say’ (Hall 1997: 33). This recalls Foucault’s notion that the imprecision and insufficiency of language haunt the modern subject who is compelled to ‘[lodge] his thought in the folds of a language so much older than himself that he cannot master its significations, even though they have been called back to life by the insistence of his words’ (2002 [1966]: 346).

In the context of this article, not only are the boundaries of *Lula* indefinite, as per ‘fashion media discourse’ (Rocamora 2009), but so too are the eventual meanings of statements therein, including those concerning the *Lula girl*. Her eventual meaning is thus contingent upon the context in which she appears, as well as the ‘cultural competences’ (Evans and Gamman 1995: 36) brought to bear on the text. Yet, recognizing the role of the reader in processes of meaning-making does not necessarily equate with an understanding of media texts as ‘equally “open” to any and all interpretations’ (Morley 1992: 21). Stuart Hall (1992: 134) underscores this point when he states that

‘connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world.’ In the context of the magazine, editors have certain techniques at their disposal, which facilitate attempts to ‘fix the floating chain of signifieds’ (Barthes 1977: 39), with a notable example consisting in the addition of linguistic text to ‘anchor’ the meaning of accompanying images. Furthermore, combining discourse analysis with textual analysis of the *Lula girl* allows individual examples to be read in relation to broader societal discourses on women (see earlier discussion of Rocamora 2009). Such an approach facilitates a historicized and contextualized reading of the *Lula girl*, thus avoiding the overly formalist and ahistorical tendencies of semiotic analysis and structuralism, more generally (Tudor 1999: 10–11). The remainder of this article applies these methods to three ‘resonant’ examples (Holland 2004) of the *Lula girl*: ‘Flowers in December’, which explores the intersection of discourses on Romantic childhood and ‘high’ art; Iris Apfel as ‘The Ladybird’, which represents an attempt to reclaim ‘wonder’ in definitions of adulthood; and Joanna Newsom as ‘The Songbird’, which represents ‘divine’ femininity and escape from the contradictions of postlapsarian womanhood.

#### ‘Flowers in December’: overlapping discourses on Romantic childhood and ‘high’ art

The *Lula girl* in ‘Flowers in December’ is introduced as follows: ‘From sprites and fairies to Joni Mitchell and Thumbelina, lula girls wear flowers in their hair whatever the weather’ (Lula no.9 2009: 120).



Figure 2. ‘Flowers in December’, *Lula* no. 9 (2009: 120-1).  
Photography by Nicole Nodland.

Juxtaposing photography by Nicole Nodland with written text by Rachel Antonoff, the photospread constructs the *Lula girl* as abstract and elevated through overlapping discourses on ‘high’ art and Romantic childhood. A photograph of model Cecile Sinclair accompanies the opening text; her red, undulating locks are graced with a wilting peony, thus chiming with the *Lula girls’* aforementioned distance from practical concerns (they ‘wear flowers in their hair whatever the weather’). The flowing red hair and glorification of nature conjure Pre-Raphaelite idealism, and the accompanying text anchors the image thus by referencing English painter John Everett Millais and his work *Ophelia* (1851–52), the tableau for which his muse and artistic contemporary, Elizabeth Siddall, famously sat (Barringer et al. 2013: 69). This ties in with the issue’s cover girl and guest editor, Karen Elson: the British musician and model who is easily recognized by her pale, ‘English rose’ complexion and her striking red locks.

Such references to Pre-Raphaelism, or the so-called Victorian avant-garde (Barringer et al. 2013), hark back to Agnès Rocamora’s discussion of fashion writing in *Le Monde*:

Distance is imposed between the ordinary members of real life and fashion designers, who because of their magical power evolve in a space removed from the experience of everyday life, a space that, as in the Kantian aesthetic, grants them the ‘aesthetic distancing’ necessary to ‘the detachment of the aesthete’. (Rocamora 2001: 125 citing Bourdieu 1996)

By repeatedly aligning catwalk fashion with ‘high’ art, *Le Monde* symbolically produces what Rocamora terms ‘high’ fashion. The notion of ‘high’ art is here understood in Bourdieuan terms as belonging to a particular field in which art objects are mythologized as ‘pure’, ‘abstract’ and ‘esoteric’ (Rocamora 2001: 126 citing Bourdieu 1993). Drawing upon the language of ‘high’ art, *Le Monde* elevates fashion, albeit discursively, into abstract metaphors and conceptual pieces – as opposed to fashion as bodily cover, commodity or promotional showpiece for a money-making industry (Rocamora 2001: 126).

Yet *Lula*’s feature ‘Flowers in December’ evinces a second kind of distance from the everyday through intertextual reference to childhood wonder. The world of make-believe is introduced through reference not only to sprites and fairies but also the fictional character Thumbelina, the tiny girl-creature born of a flower in Hans Christian Andersen’s 1835 tale (originally published as *Tommelise*, Andersen 2011 [1835]). The accompanying text, written by Rachel Antonoff, elaborates on this idealization of childhood wonder:

Flowers in hair are a throwback to the make-your-own fun days of childhood and all the whimsy and wonder that came with it. A period when a rollicking good time required nothing but your imagination and the world was your arts and crafts drawer. It’s a gesture of *innocence and adventure that goes hand in hand with being a child*; a branch or blossom tangled in one’s hair surely could only be the result of some frolicking, possibly even mischievous fun, but also *conjures images* of long, lazy afternoons spent daydreaming in a field of daisies and unwittingly picking up a few strays as you go. (*Lula* no.9 2009: 123, emphasis added)

The author here constructs childhood as a universal and idealized state; flowers in one's hair are assumed to be 'a gesture of innocence and adventure that goes hand in hand with being a child' and as such 'conjure images of long, lazy afternoons spent daydreaming...'. Written in this way, the reader is invited to participate in mythic childhood via 'the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction' (Stewart 1993: 23). Lived experiences of childhood, in all their complexity, are dispensed with in favour of a childhood with all the hallmarks of Romantic idealism: wonder, imagination, art, innocence, adventure, nature and freedom from responsibility. Childhood here 'wears a distinctly utopian face' with its vision of the past having 'only ideological reality' (Stewart 1993: 23). It is a childhood bracketed off as 'beautiful, tender, far away, self-sufficient, sealed-off, accessible only by invitation, [that] should never be approached by realistic expectations but with imaginative ones' (Kincaid 1992: 221). *Lula* magazine holds out precisely one such invitation: beckoning the reader to indulge in the idealized world of Romantic innocence.

### **The *Lula* girl's gaze as unpolluted: 'pediocularity' and the aesthetic disposition**

There is, however, an overlap in the way that 'high fashion' and Romantic childhood are discursively constructed. Kincaid highlights this in his statement that 'the child's world is the world of pure art, which means it is unnecessary, useless and "nothing to us". Because it is everything to us.' (1992: 221). Kincaid's remark posits the child's world as 'useless' yet idealized and can be unpacked with reference to the 'sacralization of childhood': a process entailed by the gradual withdrawal of child labour in the nineteenth century (Zelizer 1985: 11). This process led the labouring child to be transformed from 'object of utility to object of sentiment', thus extending the reach of Romantic notions of childhood. 'In an increasingly commercialized world', writes Viviana A. Zelizer, 'children were reserved a separate non-commercial place, *extra-commercium*. The economic and sentimental value of children were thereby declared to be radically incompatible' (1985: 11). Childhood, therefore, was distanced from notions of commerce and utility, much like the 'disinterested' construction of the aesthetic disposition (Bourdieu 1986).

Paradoxically, however, from the 1930s onwards the process of sacralization involved a shift towards 'pediocularity' in retail practices, that is, the practice of seeing through children's eyes (Cook 2004: 67). In other words, the child's vantage point came to be privileged over that of the mother: functioning 'not only as a duty but as a moral imperative, because that which emanates from "the child" is assumed to indicate what is right and correct' (Cook 2004: 68). 'Pediocularity' thus understood 'repeats and reinscribes childhood innocence [by] [encoding] children's "special nature" in their presumed, and presumably unpolluted gaze' (Cook 2004: 68). The dictum implied by such practices was that 'adults would do well to find their way back to seeing the world as a child [...] but



this return to Eden is impossible' (2004: 68). The child's 'unpolluted gaze' was thus put to use in retail practices despite the discursive incompatibility of 'sacred' childhood and commercial intent.<sup>4</sup>

A similar disavowal is effected in 'Flowers in December' (Figure 2) through the seamless linking of childhood wonder to couture fashion.

Whether inspiration came from fairies or flower children, the catwalks were abloom. I was transported back to the wonder of my childhood backyard upon seeing Japanese milliner/hair stylist Katsuya Kamo's phantasmagorical creations for the Chanel paper-themed Spring 2009 couture show. (Lula no.9 2009: 124)

Not only is the gaze 'unpolluted' with recourse to sacred childhood, but it is also 'purified' through reference to the language of creation: 'fashion-artists and their creations belong to an autonomous world of pure art, not to a world led by commercial interest', as Rocamora observes in the context of *Le Monde* (2001: 132).<sup>5</sup> From this, the *Lula girl* facilitates indulgence in fashion, the 'child of capitalism' (Wilson 1985: 13), while simultaneously distancing such indulgence from the 'dirt' surrounding conditions of production, the environment and fashion's agenda of 'planned obsolescence' (Craik 1993: 6). Such distancing strategies undeniably make fashion more enticing but it would be reductive to posit these as the sole motivation that informs constructions of the *Lula girl*, particularly given that *Lula* belongs to a genre of magazines whose output tends not to be financially profitable. In fact, Lyng-Jorlén has found that 'most producers of niche fashion magazines consider themselves to be creative, independent or even artistic', usually seeing 'advertising as a necessary evil' (2012: 13). So if the stake in the *Lula girl* is not solely financial, what other investments might producers – and indeed readers – have in this childlike subject position?

### **Investing in the *Lula Girl* as normative subject position**

Stuart Hall (2000: 19) understands identity as 'the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always "knowing" (the language of consciousness here betrays us) that they are representations' in discourse. Subject positions are not imposed on individuals in any straightforward disciplinary sense; instead, 'an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is "hailed", but that the subject invests in the position [...] as an *articulation*, rather than a one-sided process' (2000: 19, original emphasis). Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (1996) similarly adopt the term 'investment', suggesting it avoids 'both biological or psychological connotations such as "motivation" or "need", and rationalistic ones such as "choice" (1996: 120 citing Henriques et al. 1984).

Building upon the writings of Henriques et al. (1984) and Hollway (1987), Ang and Hermes go on to define 'investment' as

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<sup>4</sup> Cook (2004) discusses specific examples of pedicularity in retail practices. These include the development of special packaging and displays for children as well as attempts to '[grab] the child's attention through story books or characters and other items of children's culture' (Cook 2004: 73–74). These strategies, in turn, drew parents into the store and encouraged them to spend.

<sup>5</sup> See also Tseñlon (2010) for discussion of fairies and childhood vis-à-vis the fashion show.

an emotional commitment, involved in the taking up of certain subject positions by concrete subjects [...] Investment suggests that people have an – often unconscious – stake in identifying with certain subject positions, including gender positions [...] People invest in positions which confer on them relative power, although an empowering position in one context (say, in the family) can be quite disempowering in another (say, in the workplace), while in any one context a person can take up both empowering and disempowering positions at the same time. (Ang and Hermes 1996: 120–21)

This framework allows for the theoretical possibility of investing in a range of subject positions: some of which are empowering in a feminist sense and some of which are disempowering. With regards *Lula* magazine, it is worth considering what stake – whether emotional commitment, unconscious reward or feminist empowerment – individuals might have in the childlike position of the *Lula girl*.

### **Iris Apfel as the ‘Ladybird’: reclaiming wonder in definitions of adulthood**

An interview with textile designer and fashion icon Iris Apfel provides an insight into the possible appeal of childlike wonder to adult readers. Presumably in her late eighties at the time of publication, the designer was interviewed for an article entitled ‘Ladybird: with her incomparable style, wit, and wardrobe, we *love* Iris Apfel’ (Lula no.14 2012: 91, original emphasis). Led by 15-year-old blogger Tavi Gevinson, the interview opens with immediate reference to childhood:

**TG:** Thanks so much for doing this. I think you’d really like Lula. Every time I get a new issue I put it on its own shelf and decorate the shelf around it. I become such a little girl.

**IA:** That’s good. Stay a little girl. Everybody should be not childish, but they should be childlike. I think that’s the problem. You lose a lot of that as you grow up. And I think it’s very important to keep whimsy and all those lovely feelings.

**TG:** What do you think is the difference between that and childish?

**IA:** Well to me when I think childish I think petulant and silly and, you know, wahhhh, and all that. But childlike...I mean it’s just my own definition...childlike to me is all the better qualities of childhood. The wonder. Wonder is something that seems to have gone out of fashion. Everything is so material and so scientific and so technological and I think it throws humanism down the drain, which to me is a terrible thing. (Lula no.14 2012: 92)

In encouraging Gevinson to remain ‘a little girl’, Apfel draws a distinction between the quality of being ‘childlike’ and that of being ‘childish’. The latter, Apfel explains, refers to petulance, silliness and ‘wahhhh’ (presumably referring to the too-much-ness of children’s never-ending demands). By contrast, the ‘childlike’ is framed in terms of ‘all the better qualities of childhood’, such as ‘wonder’ and ‘whimsy’. Apfel’s definition of the ‘childlike’ approximates Rousseau’s ideal of Romantic innocence – articulated in opposition to the ‘adult’ world perceived as material, technological and scientific. As if to reinforce the point, the interview text is juxtaposed with a sepia photograph of ‘Iris at three (or four or five) with Uncle Harry’, taken from the private collection of Carl and Iris Apfel.

The idea that wonder belongs to childhood plays into a broader discourse in which strict dividing lines are drawn between the feelings and experiences of adults and those of children. The

lure of the *Lula girl* might therefore be understood as a sort of dissatisfaction with the analytical division between childhood and adulthood, girlhood and womanhood, be it on the part of reader or producer. Indeed, Elizabeth Wilson (2004: 383) argues that ‘it is [...] the very irrationality of fashion – its most often criticized aspect – that gives it significance. It bears witness that the magical is more than just the refuse, the useless rubbish of the rational Enlightenment world.’ Fashion media discourse, in this respect, provides an occasion for investment in feelings of wonder and escape that have been analytically excluded, or ‘forgotten’, from definitions of adulthood since the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Although *Lula* offers a window into aspects that are often excluded from definitions of ‘adulthood’, the politics of gender should not be elided here. The idea of *Lula girls*, as magical, childlike and at home in nature ties in to a discourse in which ‘woman’ is posited as irrational creature of the body in opposition to ‘man’ who is posited as rational and cultivated (Oakley 1994). In the same way that Rousseau posited the child as transcendental (1993 [1762]: 146–47), ‘the image of woman’ has historically been used to symbolize ‘something other than herself’ (Mulvey 1996: 54). The *femme-enfant* in early Surrealism is one such case in point. André Breton essentialized and valorized the symbolic woman as closer to the unconscious, closer to madness and closer to the idealized state of childhood (Chadwick: 1985: 16). Although revering the mythic *femme-enfant* for her magic, ethereal and inner-directed nature, Breton simultaneously posited her as beyond rational comprehension, thus reinforcing the myth of woman as ‘enigmatic’.<sup>7</sup> The *Lula girl*, then, must also be read through this discursive lens.

### **Joanna Newsom as ‘The Songbird’: dissolving the contradictions of normative femininity**

The theme of childlike or womanly magic carries over into other issues of *Lula*, with one example consisting in ‘The Songbird’, a feature devoted to musician Joanna Newsom.

Since featuring her in our very first issue, Joanna Newsom has been a girl of *Lula*’s dreams: bewitching and beguiling us with her wondrous music, her spectacular voice, and the magic that her music weaves. As she prepares to release her third album, she spoke to *Lula* of everything from home and harps to fashion and family. (*Lula* no.10 2010: 52)

Photographed by Annabel Mehran, Newsom appears in many a rarefied guise: angelic or birdlike with ivory wings; gracefully en pointe in ribboned ballerina shoes; and posing sweetly, white heart in hands, amidst a bathtub of white fluffy feathers (far preferable to dirty bathwater).

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<sup>6</sup> See also González (2010) for discussion of the ‘paradoxical harmony’ of fashion and Romanticism.

<sup>7</sup> See Lusty (2007) for discussion of the distinction between the symbolic woman of surrealism and the artistic and intellectual contribution of ‘real-life’ women to the movement.



**Figure 3. 'Joanna Newsom: Songbird', *Lula* no.10 (2010: 59, 62).  
Photography by Annabel Mehran.**

This image of Newsom as 'elevated' fits with wider media discourse on the musician. For instance, Will Hodgkinson (2010), in a review for *The Guardian*, recounts that 'taking centre stage behind an enormous harp, with her flowing locks and floor-length gown, Newsom came across like a pre-Raphaelite muse'. Nevertheless, in the wry style somewhat characteristic of *The Guardian* (see Rocamora 2001), Hodgkinson notes that Newsom's spell was quickly broken when she referred to the audience as 'you guys'.

Readers and producers might invest in Newsom's rarefied image because it has the capacity to dissolve the contradictions of contemporary womanhood, transcending the virgin/whore dichotomy, which has long haunted discursive positionings of women. Once alleged to exist *within* every woman, this dichotomy came to be construed as existing *between* women in the nineteenth century, with distinctions often drawn on the basis of social class (Bland 1981). The middle-class woman was kept discursively 'pure' through the displacement of desire and sexuality onto the 'impure whore' (Bland 1981). This displacement ensured that the middle-class woman remained 'virtuous' and 'the home she inhabited pure and unsullied' (Bland 1981: 59). Virtuous womanhood reaches its apex in the figure of the virgin mother: an ideal that ties the female subject to a discourse that is impossibly paradoxical. For, as Efrat Tseëlon explains, 'not only is the moral ideal of virginity an antithesis to sexuality. It is also an antithesis to procreation. The solution embodied by Mary of Immaculate Conception is a phantasy solution' (Tseëlon 1995: 11). And so, too, is the solution offered up by the *Lula* girl.

Thumbelina, referenced in ‘Flowers in December’ (Lula no.9 2009: 120; see Figure 2, above), represents one instance where the virgin mother paradox is resolved with panache. The tale begins with a woman ‘who wanted so very much to have a tiny little child, but [...] did not know where to find one’ (Andersen 2011 [1835]). She took her quandary to a witch who in turn offered her a grain of barley. Gratefully accepting and paying for the grain, the woman returned home and planted it in a flowerpot. Before long the grain had grown into a large flower, ‘which looked very much like a tulip’. The woman then kissed the bloom, which sprung open to reveal a tiny girl sat upon a green cushion (Andersen 2011 [1835]). Thumbelina was born – with her mother’s purity intact and no mention of messy childbirth or ‘debased’ practices of procreation.

Elevated creatures are of great import to ‘high’ fashion: being a world ‘peopled with “divine beings” [...] and “fairy princesses”’ (Rocamora 2001: 134 quoting from *Le Monde*). Joanna Newsom achieves divine status not only through her Pre-Raphaelite aura and artistic pursuits but also through a media discourse that posits her as childlike. Expressing disappointment with media reportage, Newsom states: ‘I was bummed at everyone saying that my songs were innocent and nursery-rhyme-like [...] and coding my eccentricities as childlike and naïve. I felt like it minimized my intelligence’ (Newsom quoted in Rosen 2010). Newsom’s mention of ‘innocence’ is significant in that Romantic childhood is constructed in binary opposition to adult knowingness, sexual or otherwise (Higonnet 1998). Remaining childlike, by this account, means remaining ‘innocent’ or ‘pure’ through distance from bodily appetite or sexual knowledge, in spite of competing discourses, such as Freud’s (2006 [1905]) that point to the existence of sexual drives in children. Virginal ‘purity’, like Romantic childhood, has long been mythologized as ‘an angelic state that [...] existed in paradise before the Fall. It is a mediator between the human and the divine’ (Tseëlon 1995: 13 citing Brown 1986). Newsom’s ‘divine’ nature is further underlined by her playing of the harp, that ‘orchestral instrument once most closely associated with angelic behavior’ (Thorpe 2010). Herein lies the difficulty in depicting women as ‘sublime and childlike’ (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 242). While the language of sublimity ‘elevates’ Newsom from the contradictory demands of normative femininity, the language of childhood – such as innocence, naivety and nursery rhymes – works to undermine her intellect, musical ability and literary prowess, thus reducing the content of her oeuvre to the ‘divisions of a high-school girl’s learning’ (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 240).

### **The trouble with naturalizing ‘constructed coherence’**

A number of potential investments in the *Lula girl* have been identified in the course of this article. Intersecting discourses on fashion as ‘high’ art and Romantic childhood as ‘sacred’ furnish the *Lula girl*, or reader, with a ‘pure gaze’, thus repressing the unpalatable aspects – commercial and otherwise – of the fashion industry. Secondly, the *Lula girl* offers a definition of adulthood that is more inclusive. It contains aspects of wonder, magic and joie-de-vivre: notions that tend to be analytically excluded from contemporary definitions of rational adulthood. Finally, *Lula girls* are distanced from

active, womanly sexuality through an ethereal, almost virginal, version of childlike femininity. Being otherworldly, whether angelic, ladybird-like or caught in a fairytale, *Lula girls* sidestep the contradictory interpellations stemming from the virgin/whore dichotomy that informs much societal discourse on what it means to be a woman.

Investment in the *Lula girl* might therefore represent a sort of fantasy space, suspending ‘the distance between a (pleasurable) absent and an (unpleasurable) present’ (Ang 1996: 384). According to Ang (1996: 384), such ‘play with reality’ allows one to ‘try out’ different subject positions without having to worry about their ‘reality value’ or the political consequences of adopting such positions in lived experience. Fantasy thereby constructs imaginary solutions for real-life contradictions. The fictitious simplicity of these solutions allows one to sidestep the complexity and frustrations of a social world in which gender equality has not yet been achieved.

It is in this sense that the *Lula girl* can be seen to go with the grain of language: she dissolves the contradictions of femininity in a way that does little to critique, or intervene in, the construction of normative femininities. The *Lula girl* disavows the impossibility of contradictory discourses on femininity, instead offering nostalgic utopia within that frame. Judith Butler (2006 [1990]: 185) suggests that coherence is ‘desired, wished for [and] idealized’ by the subject in order to maintain the ‘integrity’ of one’s sexed and gendered identity:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. (Butler 2006 [1990]: 185, original emphasis)

Politically, then, the fantasy position of the *Lula girl* is problematic because her coherence is naturalized. Little is done to unravel the fiction of Romantic innocence, in all its exclusionary tropes. Instead this white, middle-class, ‘pure’ version of femininity is presented as the natural order of things: seeming to stem from some interior feminine ‘essence’.

*Lula dream girls*, who offer pleasure through escape and coherence, can be contrasted with other versions of childlike femininity that are more parodic in nature, such as the *Kinderwhore* (see Arnold 1999). While drawing on the language of ‘sweet’ femininity, such as Mary Jane shoes and gingham checks, the *Kinderwhore* is presented through strategies of re-contextualisation, dissonance and exaggeration (terms discussed in Butler 2006). This serves to underline the contradictory nature of discursive ideals of womanhood, thereby disrupting ‘the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence’ (2006: 187). In contrast to representations of the *Lula girl*, such strategies provide an occasion for politics and pleasure to coexist. Indulgence in ‘innocent’ femininity is effected, while its constructed coherence is unstuck, thus revealing it to be a regulatory fiction rather than a unified and eternal identity, there for the taking.

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